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ABSTRACT

Most parent involvement programs are based on one of two implicit models: the parent education model, in which parents are offered lectures and information about children's learning and development, and the parent support or parent empowerment model, which recognizes that parents have specialized knowledge of their children and assumes that if teachers take this knowledge seriously, teaching can become more responsive to children's needs. Most new parent support formats have originated in conjunction with early childhood education. The National Academy of Early Childhood Programs (NAECP) has developed guidelines for parent involvement, but the actual amount of communication that takes place between parents and teachers is considerably less than that set forth in the guidelines. The challenges involved with encouraging parent involvement concern ways to individualize programs for parents that are actually put into practice, ways to reconcile trends toward parent empowerment with teachers' desires for increased professionalism, and ways to respond to recent demographic changes in families that limit parental involvement. Educators must find ways to support parents' care and concern, even when parents cannot be actively involved. (MM)

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Parents and Teachers: Can They Learn From Each Other?

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For more than fifty years, relations between parents and teachers have been troubled (Waller, 1932; Powell, 1989). The two groups, it often seems, have fundamentally different perspectives on children, with parents claiming stronger bonds and wider responsibilities to fewer children, and teachers claiming the opposite. Beginning teachers of all grade-levels report relations with parents as one of the most awkward aspects of their work, ranking it as difficult as mastering classroom management, motivating students, and responding to individual differences (Veenman, 1984). From the point of view of teachers, parents make numerous evaluations of their work through indirect comments before or after school, for example, or during unsolicited phone calls about classroom matters. Generally the evaluations seem negative to novice teachers, or at least not positive in an explicit enough way. From the point of view of parents, however, teachers can seem insensitive to the needs of individual children, fail to respect parents' knowledge of their own children, and create obstacles to communication by making themselves relatively unavailable (Powell, 1988a).

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These difficulties have led to decades of effort to involve parents in the education of their children. Though numerous programs of parent involvement have been developed, most have been based on only one of two implicit models. The first, the *parent education* model, was the mainstay of parent involvement from early in this century until the early 1960's (Fein, 1980). In this sort of program, parents are offered lectures and various printed information about children's learning and development, often in a decidedly academic or didactic format. Usually

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the recipients of such programs are middle-class parents with the time and intellectual skills to benefit from them, as well as enough self-esteem about their parenting skills not to feel threatened by implied challenges to their parenting styles occasionally expressed by child development or educational "experts."

A parent education orientation is still alive and well (e.g. White, 1983; Kagan, et al., 1987), but since the 1960's many have experienced a major shift in orientation to a *parent support* or *parent empowerment* model of parent involvement in education. This approach makes rather different assumptions about parents and their proper relationship to educators (Stevens, 1991). For one thing, it assumes that not only teachers, but parents have specialized knowledge of their children, and this knowledge has much to offer teachers. It is also assumed that if teachers take parents' knowledge seriously, teaching can become more responsive to the needs of children as individuals. An additional positive by-product is the effect on parents themselves. Taking parents seriously should increase the self-confidence of parents in dealing with other institutions in the community, such as welfare services or medical services, where parent-professional relationships also can be awkward, particularly for families with low-incomes or who are culturally different (Powell, 1988).

Because of the assumptions that they make, parent support programs have been both more idiosyncratic and more complex than the older-style parent education programs. Some program formats used a traditional format, group discussion meetings, but reversed power relations by inviting parents to set the agenda rather than teachers or other professionals (Cochran, 1988). Others have arranged home-visit programs, in which teachers literally leave their traditional territory in order to meet with parents on theirs (Larner and Halpern, 1987). Still others have

set up drop-centers for parents, which may include additional programs such as para-legal advocates to assist in dealing with difficult or bureaucratic institutions (Kagan, et al., 1987).

Most of the new parent support formats have originated in conjunction with the branch of education historically most concerned with parent involvement, early childhood education (Powell, 1991). The National Academy of Early Childhood Programs, an agency that accreditates early childhood programs in the United States and Canada, has even developed detailed guidelines for parent involvement (NAECP, 1984). They recommend that parent programs emphasize support rather than education, whatever their institutional sponsorship. They also recommend that parent programs in particular include five elements: 1) provision of written information to parents about teachers' philosophy and daily operating procedures, 2) pre-enrollment visits to homes and/or parent meetings, 3) planned (not accidentally occurring) discussions about preferred behavior management strategies at home and at school, 4) a standing invitation to parents to visit the classroom, 5) a method for insuring day-to-day information about the child whenever either the parent or teacher feels the need. These are clearly honorable goals, and in principle are all possible to realize even in normal school working conditions. Whether they are in fact realized, however, will depend on several intangibles, such as the priority which teachers and parents give to establishing successful parent involvement, and the priority which school administrators attach to success in this area (Weiss, 1987).

In practice, the actual amount of communication is considerably less than implied by the NAECP's priorities listed above. One study of early childhood programs, for example, found that even in one educational program explicitly committed to parent involvement, parents confined most of their communications with teaching staff to about 7 minutes per day during pick-up and

drop-off times. The program also scheduled only three parent-teacher conferences per year, each of which lasted only ten minutes (Zigler and Turner, 1982). Most of the talk in the highly committed program was about what the child's day was like; little of it focused on longer-term issues of parenting or education. Overall, the amount of contact probably represents more than average. The program that was studied dealt only with young children (kindergarten and prekindergarten-age), where involvement is typically stronger than in programs for older students, and where higher student loads, especially beyond Grade 6, often make communication with individual parents less practical in any case.

The low average involvement conceals wide individual differences, however, among teachers and parents in how thoroughly and easily they communicate with each other. Certain parents seem to become involved with their child's education and teacher more than do others. Research has found that greater communication tends to occur when parents have younger children and fewer children, as well as when parents are socially acquainted with other parents in the child's class or school (Zigler and Turner, 1982; Powell, 1988, p. 76-77). They also talk more with teachers who are older, and who are comfortable allowing conversation about concerns that parents have about themselves, such as job or marital problems, as well as concerns focused on the child (Hughes, 1985). All of these factors are difficult for educational leaders to influence directly, though they do suggest indirect strategies for improving communication. Perhaps, for example, principals and teachers should encourage parents to meet each other, and not just to meet children's teachers; and perhaps teachers might benefit from in-service training specifically aimed at responding to parents' problems, as well as children's.

All things considered, strategies for parent involvement have become much more democratic than in earlier times. But the trend toward democracy has created its own problems. One is how to individualize programs for parents in actual practice (Powell, 1988b). Although classic formats like parent education classes and discussion groups may indeed be inappropriate for some families, they still have a place alongside newer formats like drop-in centers and home visits. How are educational leaders to diagnose which families will respond well to which particular strategies? This would seem an obvious question for educational research to answer, though in fact it has not done so thus far.

Another challenge is how to reconcile the newer trends toward parent empowerment with teachers' ongoing desire for greater professionalism. Inviting parents' opinions about curriculum and instruction may indeed stimulate communication and involvement, but it may also blur the respective roles of parents and teachers, and create subtle competition to establish who is entitled to offer advice and make decisions about children (Kagan, et al., 1987). It seems as if sooner or later, strong programs of parent involvement must question the traditional assumptions that professionals should keep a degree of emotional distance, and that they should claim expertise for themselves (Welker, 1991).

A third challenge is how to respond to the recent demographic changes in families that necessarily limit parental involvement. Now more than ever, there are large numbers of single-parent and dual-career families; in some school communities, such parents in fact constitute the majority. Yet these parents have less time to communicate with teachers, visit their children's classes, or attend parent-teacher meetings. What formats can reach out to such parents, especially in ways that do not implicitly blame them for the long hours they must commit to work? As

educators, we must find ways to support parents' care and concern, even when they cannot show it through their physical presence as much as we might prefer. In the end we must also assume that all parents care about their children's education as much as ever, and that our special contribution as educators is to convey this support to parents wherever possible.

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Abstract:

Involving parents in their children's education has long been an important, but difficult goal of teachers, especially in early years education. Programs of parent involvement have traditionally been modeled after educational programs, emphasizing instructional lectures and associated discussions and reading materials. The ineffectiveness of this model with some parents has led to a *parent support* model of involvement, which allows parents much more influence in how they learn about their children's education, and provides parents supports for their own concerns as parents. The parent support approach has led to a wider range of program formats, and has raised new questions about the appropriate relationship between parents and professional teachers, and about how to respond to the changing demographics of modern families.